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ABSTRACT

This document is the personal narrative of a woman who has spent her career as an international adult educator. The narrative begins with the author's graduate studies in West Berlin in 1975, during which she researched the education and career pathways of professional women in West Berlin's universities. The remainder of the narrative is devoted to her teaching career at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), a public university with a student body that is two-thirds Black. Special attention is paid to the author's efforts to develop and find financial support for international educational exchange programs that would allow UDC students to study abroad in various African countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Nairobi, Seychelles, and Tanzania. Also discussed are a master's-level international education exchange program that the author developed and that involved having students earn graduate-level credits while serving in the Peace Corps and simultaneously carrying out directed study, research, or internships in developing countries. The document concludes with a brief description of the author's activities as an international adult educator at the University of Southern Maine and as a member of the executive committee of the International Council for Adult Education. (MN)

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Reflections on My Career as an International Adult Educator

by

Beverly Benner Cassara

It all started in Germany. That is to say, it started when the Fulbright Commission accepted my proposal to do a research study in West Berlin in 1975 concerning the education and career pathways of professional women in the then four universities there. Space does not allow to report most of the findings here, or how I achieved them. Suffice it to say that most women were at the lower end of the academic ladder at that time, and that they even made it into the academic life was due to a pattern of special circumstances relating to position in the family and parental attitudes concerning the education of girls.

Returning to the United States, I published an article showing by comparison that the status of women in universities in the United States was only a little different. To make sure that my German study received attention, I had it translated into German before I sent it back to the appropriate persons. One of those persons was a nationally known academic feminist whom I respected very much, Helge Pross at the University of Siegen, and I never really expected to hear from her. But I did, and she changed my career. She invited me to become a guest professor at the University of Siegen in the Research Institute for a semester in 1982. No longer was the Fulbright fellowship a one-time foray into the international dimension, it was the beginning of fifteen years of international experience which I have used to the utmost to aid my students and the field of adult education.

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Germany had then, and still does have, an extensive international adult education program, striving to help adults in Third World countries to gain knowledge and skills to enhance the quality of their lives. It was a privilege to be accepted into the international community of adult educators, to understand the global challenges to the field, and realize that I and my American colleagues needed to play our part, to forget national boundaries and think of people instead. A few adventurous leaders were just opening up the international field in the United States and I went back to take part in the effort..

The University of the District of Columbia is the public university in the nation's capital, and since the population is composed of two-thirds Black people, UDC is essentially a Black university. I knew that students in private universities often had opportunities to study abroad and I wanted my graduate students to have that chance, too. My first effort was to offer a course in some aspect of international adult education every semester. Being in Washington, there were many resources available and resource persons. We had speakers from the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development, the World Health Organization, and many international non-governmental organizations.

I started to write proposals for sending students abroad to study, which I submitted to every possible agency, but with no success. Therefore, I decided that we could organize a three-week trip abroad ourselves. Students would have to pay most of their own costs, but we did raise some money to help them.

At first, I was interested in Ghana. I had met the Chair of the Adult Education Department at the University of Ghana at a conference in Detroit, and he was most anxious to establish a sister relationship with our program. He came to Washington, met with the faculty and we laid out our plans, but just at that time there was a coup in his country and great inflation and we had to give it over.

However, fate played into our hands. A former UDC adult education graduate student had just returned from Kenya and was enthusiastic about the efforts of the Adult Education College at the University of Nairobi, and its chairman, Peter Kinyanjui. So Nairobi became our goal. Peter was most happy to work with us. I sent proposals for financing the trip to fifty-three United States companies doing business in Kenya. Coca Cola was the only one which chose to assist. It offered us $1,500, to be used in Kenya.

From this point on every effort brought additional new challenges. For instance, Peter needed Malcolm Knowles' books which his government did not allow him to purchase. Therefore, we bought them from our travel money, and when we got to Kenya, Peter was able to reimburse us $450 from the Coca Cola grant.

I had never visited Africa and neither had the other faculty member traveling with us. None of us had ever believed we would actually have a chance to visit that far-off and exciting continent. Our three weeks there were filled with a seminar which met all morning and all afternoon, except on the two week-ends. We had so much to read in preparation for our seminar meetings

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that we had to have special lamps put in our hotel rooms to provide better light. We made friends with the professors from the University, and, in the evenings, and on the weekends, Peter arranged visits to prominent persons, and interesting places--overnight at Mount Kenya, a trip to Mombasa and another to Kisumu on Lake Victoria where there was a new Labor College for workers. We did not waste a minute, and we had made relationships that would continue to develop during the following years.

Still determined to find funds for students to study for longer periods in Kenya, Peter and I wrote a proposal which we presented to the United States Agency for International Development office in Kenya. It was well received and they promised to send it to Washington with their approval.For whatever reason, it was never found in Washington and we received little encouragement.

However, when I was a member of the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, I heard a speaker from the United States Information Agency at one of our conferences who was speaking about a new fund for academic exchange programs. We did get a grant for $50,000, for an exchange program between our department and the College of Adult Education in Nairobi. The only drawback was that it could only be used for faculty, not students. But, over a period of three years, we exchanged seven faculty members from each university, most for three months each, a few for less. Exchanging fourteen person on that amount of money was only possible because we had community support and hospitality on both sides. This was actually a good thing, for necessity was the mother of getting the larger community

involved in knowing and caring about the other country. We were doing "extension education," in fact.

Faculty members taught courses, or did team-teaching, in the exchange university. In addition, they gave lectures in churches, civic associations, and schools. We organized on both sides for visitors to understand the culture and governments of the other country. Receptions were hosted in Washington by the Department of Education and the United States Information Agency. We arranged for visitors to attend regional and national adult education conferences. It was especially important to help visiting faculty members meet with influential persons who could help them get grants for their research projects back in Kenya.

At the end of the three-year grant, I went to Kenya for the follow-up evaluation project. My husband, a professor of American History, went with me at his own expense. He was invited to speak on "The American Constitution and Human Rights" in every provincial city but the one that was out of bounds for visitors because of terrorist dangers. The halls were filled. In one locality, the audience waited patiently for more than an hour when our van became mired in mud. The discussion periods were very lively, so that it was hard to end them.

I should pause here to insert one most satisfying bit of information. One of my American students from UDC had become the Director of Adult Education for the country of St. Kitts in the Caribbean. It was the year of the United Nations Conference on Women. She was in Nairobi as the official representative of St. Kitts. I was there as a member of the Non-Governmental Forum

meeting outside the official sessions. This woman later passed the American State Department's foreign service examination, and, after six-months of intensive instruction in French, she was posted to the office of Cultural Affairs at the American embassy in Chad. She is now the Cultural Director at our embassy in Abidjan in the Ivory Coast. Remarkably, she has managed to finish her doctoral dissertation while carrying out these responsibilities.

Still, the UDC students wanted their chance to experience Kenya, and since no other way seemed possible, two of them who had been on the first trip, organized a tour, with students paying their own way. They attended the Non-Governmental Forum at the United Nations Conference on Women and traveled around the country to observe women's education in Kenya. A couple of years later, another group went to Seychelles, Kenya, and Tanzania. Who would have believed that graduate students at UDC would have worked so hard to find resources to experience adult education across the world?

We sent an issue of the UDC Graduate Journal on the subject of international adult education to every university library in the country. In addition, I wrote articles that were published in a number of places. Students who had been to Kenya organized an African Cultural Fair for the whole university.

In the mid-seventies, I did a study of all the one hundred or so departments of adult education in the U.S. and Canada, and found that only about one-half dozen had international programs. For that reason it was important to start spreading the word, and we began holding conferences at UDC which were attended by

persons from all over the U.S. and abroad. It is interesting to note that in three of our conferences, we had distinguished professors from Germany as speakers. This effort fed into the further development of two national associations, the International Unit of the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education and the Coalition of Adult Education Organizations. I was chair of the international groups in both organizations several times.

One of the professors visiting us from Kenya desired to return to the States to study for a doctorate in Adult Education. In the thirty-five member faculty of the College of Adult Education in Kenya there were only two who held doctorates. Along with another woman in the University, I organized an effort to bring him back. We solicited funds, she provided board and room, he worked part-time, and still he finished successfully in five years. Since it was only possible for him to return to visit his wife and four children perhaps twice or three times in that period, this was a considerable sacrifice for him and his family to make. On one occasion, he did team-teaching with me. This was rewarding for the students and for me.

I did find one way to arrange for students to gain international experience. The Peace Corps had come to realize that developing countries needed more expertise than students with only the undergraduate degree might have, and were looking for volunteers with a Master's degree. I drew up a plan whereby our graduate students could complete twenty-seven of their thirty-six credits at the university and earn the other nine in the host

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country in the Peace Corps by carrying out directed study, research or internships. I managed to get the plan approved by officials of our university and the Peace Corps. This took a year of meetings one-on-one and in groups.

We arranged for one woman to work in Malawi in a school for special children. She taught children, and, also, the teachers and parents, as well, on how best to help these children. She received high praise from UNICEF, which arranged to film her work to show in other countries.

Another student went to Honduras to work on distance education by radio. She also went to small villages to help women find ways to better their lives. In addition, she assisted them in creating a women's newspaper in which they share their ideas with many women in small villages. When she returned to the United states, she was appointed to the position of Education Director for the Americorps program in Washington, D.C.

Unfortunately, in 1990, I retired from UDC and the Peace Corps program at UDC was discontinued. I am currently teaching the international course for the University of Southern Maine. I have been able to help students there find opportunities abroad. For example, one was a man in his fifties, who after a career in publishing had come back to do the Master's in Adult Education and find a new career. He became so enthusiastic about international work that he and his wife joined the Peace Corps and taught English as a Second Language in Czechoslovakia. They were there when that country divided peacefully.

In another case, a young woman who had been doing training for a supermarket chain in Maine, and was quite bored, was

inspired by the international course. She had been brought up as a military child in Germany, and had a knowledge of the language. She did a year's internship in Human Resource Development in a company in Frankfurt. Everything worked out well for her professionally and personally, especially since she met an American soldier, whom she married. She is currently working in Human Resource Development in San Diego and studying for her doctorate.

Working with the students at the University of Southern Maine, I realized how difficult it was for the students to gain access to appropriate international resources. Information about international adult education has been available in mostly ephemeral forms, such as speeches, reports, newsletters, conference proceedings, etc., which do not show up on library shelves. Therefore, I edited a book entitled Adult Education Through World Collaboration (Florida: Krieger Pub. Co. 1995), a comprehensive study of multi-governmental, non-governmental and bi-lateral work in adult education in many parts of the world.

In 1990, I began a four-year term on the Executive Committee of the International Council for Adult Education, based in Toronto, as the North American representative. It was an education for me to work with a group of persons from thirty-five countries, each with his/her own cultural values and mores--to learn to understand the ways of thinking of persons from Algeria, Macau, Jordan, India, Trinidad, Russia, Nicaragua, etc. Agreement was not easy to come by in many matters. THe ICAE works to strengthen and improve practice within the international adult

education movement through publications, research, seminars, workshops and conferences. We met in a different country each year--Sweden, Spain, Brazil, and Egypt. It was an experience that enriched my life.

My international work has taken me now to nearly twenty countries. From Finland, where I taught in a Folk High School, working in the movement started by my guru Grundtvig of Denmark, all the way to Thailand, where I first experienced Asia.

The country I have visited most is Germany. I have lectured at Witzenhausen, Tübingen, Frankfurt, Berlin, Bonn, Hamburg and Ludwigshafen.

Along the path of this journey, I have tried in every conceivable way to provide opportunities and knowledge for my students, colleagues, my community and my readers. That is a precious responsibility and I have never failed to appreciate it.